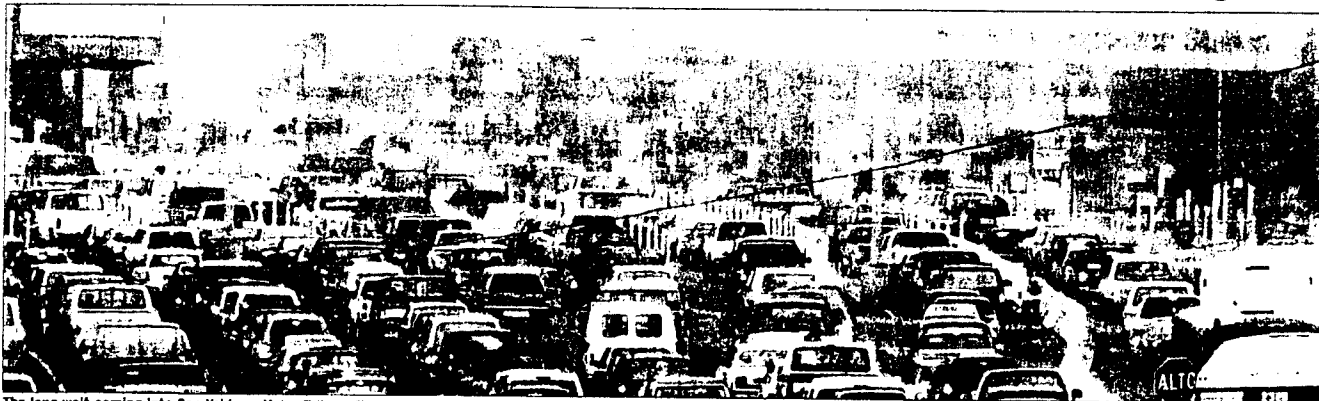


# The high cost of security



The long wait coming into San Ysidro. Union-Tribune file

## Communities need emergency help

By Bob Filner

**T**he events of Sept. 11 have affected us all. There is a collective sense of anxiousness and caution. We are more aware of the dangerous world in which we live. And the vast majority of us have gone on with our daily lives — a little more aware than we were before.

Others among us have been affected more directly — whether knowing one of the many victims of the terrorist attacks, losing a job because of changes in the economy or struggling to run a small business in an area impacted dramatically since our world changed last month.

Perhaps the most profoundly affected are the small business owners in communities along the U.S.-Mexico border. Increased inspections have resulted in longer wait times (sometimes more than four hours), and complete uncertainty, which in turn has resulted in discouraging many of the thousands of Mexican citizens who legally cross into the United States to shop and conduct business.

These security measures are necessary and important, and I support them. We must not allow our borders to be used as gateways for terrorists to enter our country. However, this increased security has resulted in wait times that make it inconvenient, if not impossible, for many who used to cross routinely to shop and conduct business to continue to do so.

As a member of Congress representing a large part of California's border with Mexico, I have a responsibility to address the needs of these communities. That is why I have asked Gov. Gray Davis and President Bush to declare an economic state of emergency along the U.S.-Mexican border. San Ysidro, Otay Mesa, Tecate, Calexico and dozens of other towns in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas have seen cross-border traffic — and the resulting dollars that those visitors bring — drop dramatically.

A state of emergency declaration would free up low-interest loans to these business owners and allow them to stay open until the situation stabilizes. It could provide no-cost grants for others. And it would bring an increased awareness to the problems facing our border communities.

In addition, I am fighting in Congress to get the money necessary to fully staff our border stations around the clock. The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates this would cost about \$6 million in additional funding. Surely, if we can provide billions to the airline industry, we can find \$6 million to pay for border security.

That \$6 million is a sound investment given that Mexican visitors to San Diego contribute \$3 billion annually into the region's economy. This slowdown has hurt not only the border,

### Wait times

A sampling of border wait times at San Ysidro taken Oct. 4-16 (before the start of photo ID) showed:

- Average wait time — cars: 60 minutes
- Average wait time — pedestrians: 22 minutes

### Reduced traffic

- Daily pedestrian crossings at San Ysidro have fallen from 42,000 to 27,000
- Daily vehicle crossings have fallen from 45,000 to 28,000

### Effect on business

- 90 percent of respondents say post Sept. 11 sales have fallen more than 30 percent
- 50 percent of respondents say post-Sept. 11 sales have fallen more than 50 percent

Sources: INS, San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce, Cross Border Partnerships

but industries throughout the region which rely on the labor, the retail spending and investment from our Mexican neighbors.

The San Ysidro Port of Entry is a major factor driving the economy of much of San Diego County and anything that negatively affects efficient movement of pedestrians and vehicles across the border will negatively affect the economy of our region. According to the San Ysidro Business Association, discretionary shoppers will not spend more than one hour waiting to cross the border in their cars and no more than 20 minutes if they are walking across. The current wait times are more than twice that.

Surveys conducted by the business association show that 93 percent say business is worse now when compared to two months ago — 96 percent report declines of 30 percent or more, and 56 percent say they've lost 50 percent or more.

And as if this weren't bad enough, the expiration of thousands of border crossing cards has only made the situation worse. I have asked for an extension of the Sept. 30 deadline so that those who have not been able to get a new crossing card have more time to do that.

Both the security that all Americans demand and the reasonable flow of legal traffic that is vital to our economy can be secured through additional resources. One hundred more inspectors at the San Ysidro border crossing, for example, can provide both the "level 1" inspection required after Sept. 11 and allow all 24 inspection lanes to be opened to facilitate legal commercial traffic.

I hope Gov. Davis and President Bush act quickly in response to my request for emergency assistance. Our business owners along the border can't afford to wait.

Filner represents California's 50th Congressional District, which includes San Ysidro and Otay Mesa.